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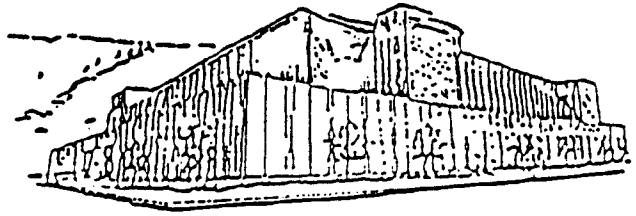
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**DEAD BUFFALO**

**by**

**Shannon Bryner**

**B.A. The University of Utah, 1998**

**presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

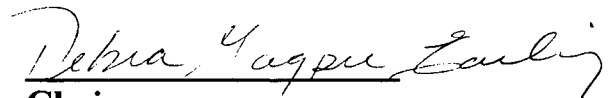
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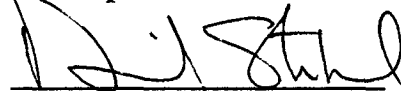
**The University of Montana**

**2000**

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# DEAD BUFFALO

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## Dead Buffalo

The circumstances were extraordinary. Everything was extraordinary for Frank's wife, a redhead named Molly who held onto tragedy like a old lumberjack might grip an axe, not to wield it, but to be feel comfort in the familiar weight. Her father died when she was too young to take it well and her son died when she was well practiced in the role of a woman among dead men. Her husband, she determined, must not die.

Her husband Frank was a worker in the steel plant in Hardton. He was a big man with a big voice and was chosen to be an icon during the labor disputes of 1960. Frank stood up one day at the plant and bellowed, "We won't do it anymore." He raised his hands, black with the stains of metal, into fists. There was coal grime on his face and in his hair. The whites of his eyes looked cleaner than wash-day linen. Men looked at him and doused the fires into bursts of smoke and stood up, yelling and banging wrenches on steel.

Molly took Jeanne, age 6, with her to the police station. She had dressed the little girl in Sunday best, a knee-length wool dress, white gloves that buttoned at her thin little girl wrists, a hat. She wanted the police to see that her husband was a decent, fathering sort, and, ever cautious, she wanted Jeanne to see where she'd end up if she ever became a prostitute. But when they arrived, Frank was already out of the cell and sitting on a padded bench with his head in his hands. He saw his wife and dismally watched her approach, rubbing his forehead into wrinkles.

"Howard told me to do it," he said. "I'm so sorry." He wrapped his arms around her waist and cried. This was when she loved him best.

Two weeks of rain, like the world had been irritated by all that sunshine and dry dirt. It stopped short, and in the bright humidity war began. Frank was the voice, and Howard the words, and they formed a muscular body of men who wouldn't do it anymore. This time when they flexed, the bosses stepped back. "I'm so sorry," said Frank to his wife after they had marched out of the plant and couldn't return. The men waited at home for the bosses to yield, meeting occasionally in a basement and once in a park pavilion, though that night the police poured down on them for disturbing the peace with their hush-hush meeting. Frank ran, and hid, and ran, finally stumbled into the house when the night was long past blue. Molly and little Jeanne were waiting in bathrobes under the yellow halo of the big lamp.

"I'm sorry," he said. Jeanne was turning the pages of a book. Her hair was freshly washed and nickel shiny. Frank stared—his big-man awkwardness sat on his shoulders like the awareness of a loose boulder among the softness of a garden. He started to move toward her, to bend down and kiss her head where a neat, thin part pulled one half of her hair away. But he stopped mid-bend. He went to the bathroom and lay in the dry bathtub for an hour.

"This is extraordinary," said Molly. The years of peacefulness, of marriage and her own kitchen and good things, were pulled taut and trembling. She put Jeanne to bed and pondered things. Her son was dead, her daughter was six, her husband lay, dirty, in the bathtub like la Pieta waiting for resurrection. She went into the bathroom and sat on the floor.

"I want you to go back to work," she said. She had weighed the two sides and found the steel bosses were stronger.



Frank was asleep and opened his eyes when she spoke. “I can’t,” he said. “It’s done. One side or the other, they would deal with me.”

She took his hand. He smelled like tall grass. “I want you not to get killed.”

Molly knew what the plant was like. She had worked there during the war, and had survived the hell-hot metal that burned away the wet of your eyes layer by layer. She and Frank had been in love, freshly married, and ate cool greens and cold ham on break outside, touching fingers. Inside, men died. A man lost his arm and too much blood when steel pilings broke loose. A man was seared when a boiler exploded—Molly gasped at his skin that was so red, then realized it wasn’t there at all, and when he realized it, too, he died. She knew the place was ugly, burning, black and red and longer than a day. But to work in hell is better than to be killed at home, she thought. She hoped he’d stay alive and be a man. But, in her experience, it was men that died.

Frank wasn’t going back, so Molly pulled coins from the cigar box and stocked their pantry with canned vegetables and pasta noodles. She went to the country and picked free peaches and apples and grapes for bottling, and pickled their garden cucumbers and watermelon rinds.

“Those men, acting like they’re supermen,” she told the neighbor Gay over jelly sandwiches. “They love war, those men, they’re sorry they didn’t die in 1943.” She spoke in a loud voice so that Frank in the bedroom would hear. Once or twice he groaned through the wall and turned over in bed with a squeak of springs. She hoped to humiliate him in his manliness, that she’d provoke him into finding a way out before there were bullets.

There were men going in and out of the back door in those days. There were talks in the cement-floored basement. Molly opened the door from the kitchen and yelled, “You men! You men get to work.” She didn’t believe in causes, she told Gay. She liked the faith she had that dough made bread and beef cooked brown was good to eat, and that was enough. There was little beef then. It was Indian Summer, and there was no income. Still, she treated the visiting conspirators royally, giving them warm bread with butter and, once, slush drinks made from real Hawaiian canned pineapple. She didn’t like them. They were wrong. She looked at the sweating glasses of slush in their hands and tried not to imagine them at the plant slowly burning to death. However, she would always be hospitable, and they would see that she wasn’t afraid of the extraordinary. She spoke to them only after they stood somewhere in the darkness below the basement stairs. “You men.”

She asked Frank to invite their wives. Sometimes they came, in hats and fat-heeled shoes. “It will all work out, Mrs. Lancaster, the bosses will come around.”

Molly laughed at them and kissed their hands like she was their mother. “No they won’t, dear, not until there’s blood.” At the invocation of blood, Molly liked to see the wives’ mouths open or cheeks flush or hands flutter to purse straps. Their fear made her calmer. She was trying to scare the women into sense. If all the wives convinced all the men to go back to work, no one would die in the night.

A brick came through the window and into the green beans. Molly almost screamed. She hoped her husband hadn’t noticed. There was a note and Frank read it painfully slowly.

“You don’t need to see this,” he said.

“Burn it,” said Molly. She was proud of Frank for being a man and taking a tragedy into himself alone. He fed the note to the fire until the flame was close enough to dog bite his fingertips with heat, then threw the brick back through the toothy mouth in the window.

Molly retrieved it from the black-eyed susans the next day. She made it a needlepoint cover and converted it into a doorstep.

Early that next morning, Molly went to the plant to wait for a boss. Jeanne would sleep in late after the brick excitement and Frank had been basement-plotting until dawn. She leaned against the gate of the back entrance and watched for a black car. She had hid her red hair up in a wide gray scarf and she thought, roll up my sleeves and flex my arms and I’m a war propaganda poster. The plant and the government no longer advertised for women to work. “Though they might again, if the men stay stubborn,” she said. She spit to the side with the thought. She had not worried much the years before, sure he wasn’t like other men who were weak enough to wane in the plant heat. She hadn’t anticipated the strike. The morning was slow to lighting and the sounds of cars seemed as far away as the horizon.

When a car pulled up to the gate, Molly put her fingers on the window. She didn’t know the man behind the glass. He was balding, wore a nice suit, had eyes that were surprisingly lighted by laugh lines. His body stiffened, afraid of her, she realized, but he rolled down the window a measured inch.

“I’m a wife,” she said. She was afraid to sound sentimental, easy to dismiss.

“There are wives, and children,” she said. “Please remember that, sir. Everyone wants to work. Everything will work.”

He nodded and began to drive forward before looking away. She never used the word “sir” and it had felt awkward on her tongue. She watched his disappearing car, looking for some sign of approval from its speed, its steady turn, the windows reflecting morning-lightened bricks in the wall. She waved, as though they were good friends. The car grew smaller in the distance, and the factory towers drew up, fantastically looming. She took the image as a challenge, something saying that maybe what she was up against was bigger than she was, and she said, “Damn you to hell.”

Days slipped forward through the heat. Frank still left late at night and men still came into the basement. Soups were made for Gay who had a summer cold. Jeanne lost her first baby tooth. Molly made crabapple jelly. Frank pulled his wife onto his lap and pressed his forehead against her spine. He had stopped saying, “I’m sorry,” weeks ago. His glasses lay on the table, tips up, like an animal that dies on its back. He pressed his fingers into the redness below his eyes.

“That’s why your eyes are red,” she said, “you’re always touching them.”

“Sing me that song, ‘Polly Von,’” he said.

She refused. It was a ballad, sad, and she didn’t want him to resolve himself to endings. She would be prepared for the tragedy, and that was enough.

As a girl, Molly lived upstairs from a bakery. Her clothes smelled like dough, her hair smelled like cooled bread. Flour came up through the vent and settled in corners like beautiful dust. When her father died, Molly was suspicious that her mother swept up the

flour and made dumplings for supper. She chewed thoughtfully, testing for dust and dirt and bits of lint.

Her father walked to work one morning and then didn't come back. The police thought he just left. It was 1937 and all over the country, men were walking away. Molly sat at the window eating charity bread from downstairs. When she broke it open the warm insides made a ghost of itself on the windowpane. Her mother was singing in the bedroom about a man who went hunting for swan and shot his fiancée. It reminded Molly to be angry at her mother who looked for solace in sadness, and who had been foolish enough in the first place to marry the kind of a man who could disappear. She left her window and went in to Johanna, who stopped singing.

"Why did he shoot her?" said Molly.

"She had her apron wrapped around her and he mistook her for a swan," said Johanna. She shrugged. "He was careless. He must have realized he was in a ballad. Realize you're in a ballad and you lose all hope."

"Did she die?" Molly stared at her mother, asking for more than a song.

"They always die in ballads. Men died. Men killed things." She looked up, and her profile was noble, like a scorned woman in an old movie. "My grandfather Eli killed buffalo, God knows why."

It was the third day that her father didn't come home. On the eighth Johanna began to work downstairs kneading dough. A year later they moved in with the baker and the upstairs was rented out. Five years later, after a powerful rainstorm that toppled tin houses and drowned chickens, they found the remains of Molly's father who had sunk into the sticky mud by the river on the way home from work.

The day they found the muddy bones, Molly stood in the kitchen with her mother making bread, elbows deep. Her dough was always too sticky and stringy like cooked cheese, or slippery wet like caught pond frogs.

“Your grandfather’s name was Eli,” said Johanna, “and like the Old Testament Eli, no man in our family since has lived beyond the flower of his life.” She hadn’t been surprised to hear her husband was dead.

“One name is no reason to sink into the ground,” said Molly. She already believed it.

She hated the baker who worked her mother too hard and smelled like raw beef. When he legally married Johanna, Molly was hopeful that, true to the family legend, he would drop dead suddenly like a man struck down by God. He did die of a heart attack, but by then Molly had married Frank.

She met Frank when she was twenty. The war was on. In the drugstore window, there was a list of local soldiers with blue stars for injured, white stars for missing and red stars for dead. The mob of adolescent boys (the little brothers of soldiers) and the single working girls met outside on Saturday nights. Some girls let the young boys buy them cokes. The war was evening things out in Hardton. Now Molly was not the only girl who had lost a father, or daughter of a woman who had lived with a man not her husband, or working girl. Our family, she realized, has tragedy before our time.

It was on a Saturday in September and the night was stiffly hot, but the occasional breeze brought icebox cold air. The sweaters the girls removed and replaced were lovely as butterflies landing. Two Hardton boys had come home from the war and the girls gathered near. They had been navy gunman. Their quick-thinking and trigger skill had

saved the entire ship from a kamikaze attack, and they had been discharged early as a reward. The butterfly girls were elated. The little brother mob leaned sullenly against the brick wall, their hands in their pockets, spitting to the side, pretending their mouths were full of strong tobacco.

The smaller veteran had dark hair and dark eyes and looked well-formed and congenial like a drawing from a Sears-Roebuck catalog. He spoke with his hands and eyebrows and took time in his storytelling to smile at each girl, as though he addressed her alone. This was Howard, who later led the workers' walk out.

The second boy, Frank, was too quiet for the girls. He looked at the drugstore sign or newly paved Main Street and his forehead pricked with sweat as though he was laboring to understand. He stood, swaying slightly, his body still in disbelief that he was on solid ground. His eyes were wide open when he looked up, wise that things come from above, and he was ready

The next weekend, the show was all Howard, still in uniform. Frank leaned against bricks with the teenagers, getting an update on baseball and the state fair. Molly was smoking. Now that she was like the other girls she didn't like it. He saw her standing alone and walked to her so slowly she thought he might never arrive.

"Good evening," he said.

"Something on your mind?" she said.

"I didn't think girls smoked."

Molly offered him a cigarette, and he took it, lighting it the way he must have learned in the navy, hunched around the match with hands and shoulders as though there was a violent wind. He was broad and looked silly bowed over, out-of-place alongside

those absurd teenaged boys and pretty working girls with their fluttering sweaters, and her cigarette smoke reaching out like a dream of a snake, forking off toward his mouth and ear

“Girls do a lot of things lately,” she said.

“They don’t go to war ”

He didn’t let memories of panic and death pass visibly through his eyes. Here’s a man, she thought, that does not die. She asked him to walk her home, flicking the last cigarette she ever smoked at the birds at their feet. They were married two months later.

Mostly what happened after that was more men died. Uncle Marl, Johanna’s brother, died in the war. Molly’s cousin Stephen died in the war. Molly’s cousin Peter died in the war. When the war stopped killing men the plant continued. Sometimes they died in bed at home coughing up blood, or sometimes on the ground at Molly’s feet, like the burned man who had held her hand and said, “Something’s wrong, I feel wrong,” before he saw that he had no more skin. But she was in love with her husband who was strong. Too big to be sucked into a muddy bank, too smart to be killed at sea, too alive to be an animal to the steel plant bosses. He was quiet in bed and she lay beside him and touched him and felt his strength as though it was her own.

Molly didn’t tell Frank about her great-grandpa Eli and the men that died. She had a dream once that she walked by the river until her feet were stopped with mud, and when she looked down, she saw she was her father. And instead of running, or lying flat, or grasping a tree branch and pulling, pulling away, she thought, this is why I’m sinking, because I’m a man, and men in this family die. Molly never wanted her husband to be



caught in mud and think, I know this ending already. Her husband wouldn't know the death you can't fight. Her husband wouldn't be pulled down by her blood's history.

When the doctor, cheerfully discreet, gave her the news of her pregnancy, Molly left the plant to get bigger. Frank walked home for lunch every day. They still kissed in public.

"Don't be so much in love," said Johanna. "I'm telling you, daughter, it hurts so much more. Better to love a not-good man."

Johanna, resolved to tragedy, closed up the bakery and lived off of savings and insurance and the goodness of a post-war economy. She visited her daughter's house to remind her of her inherited story.

"I'll keep my family alive," said Molly. "This baby will be fine."

The doctor held up the new red baby by the ankles like a fish in a photograph and Molly saw that it was a boy. She doubted for a moment her ability to hold back fate with her will. She was tired. She had bled too much, her body ached with losing sudden weight and pulling too wide. But Frank held her hand, his eyes clear and young with new fatherhood.

"You are extraordinary," he said.

He kissed her wet cheek. He smiled at her shyly and put one hand into hers and the other on her head. Molly insisted that the boy be named Frank, Jr., because she loved her husband too much.

Frank, Jr. never crossed a street alone. He wasn't allowed to climb trees without his father. She told him, "If ever you feel danger, you run away." Each year as the boy

grew bigger, Molly was more confident. She had two boys in her family now, alive, immortal.

Molly was nursing little Jeanne in the front room when the sheriff's posse, thirty mounted men, galloped down their street to a show at the state fair. She rushed to the back door just to see Frank Jr., seven—who had been spooked by the sound of one-hundred and twenty hooves and tried to climb the backyard elm—fall. She saw him fall, his feet suspended in air, his head racing for the ground, his body poised like a hawk diving for prey. She didn't remember seeing him hit, or the blood that came from his head and nose down his face like stripes on a flag, or his tiny body taken away draped in a floral sheet from her own bed. When she thought of him, he was still in mid-air, diving, turning gracefully, one hand behind his back, one outstretched, a boy who flies.

This is what Molly noticed in Frank's heaviness those last weeks of the walk out, after Jeanne lost her first tooth and Molly made crabapple jelly. In the moments that weren't thick with mortality and baking and straightening up life, Molly saw the likeness of her dead boy on her husband's face. He had lost something from inside when Frank, Jr. died. And this cause was just any cause, something he could do to stop all the dying because of the image always behind his eyes of his son in mid-air, flying or falling eternally. She thought, when he presses his head against my spine, this is the picture he sees. And she let him be.

There was a strange ordinariness for days. Men stopped coming and going, Molly stopped yelling, "you men" to the darkness of the basement. She was tired of watching the night windows for bricks or worse things, tired of kissing him for the last time. Frank's hands trembled as he ate, though he didn't sweat and his face was still as glass.

The night was colder, and Molly closed the windows and put Jeanne to bed. They sat in the front room, side by side, facing the newly-replaced windowpane. There were unquiet things outside. Frank said they were dogs. The quiet inside and the noise out reminded her of those days when her father had disappeared, and sitting alone, she would hear her mother sing from the other room.

“My great-grandpa Eli killed buffalo,” Molly said. Frank was looking out the living room window, resolved to night. “He killed hundreds of them, and not for their hides or tongues.”

Frank turned to her. Perhaps he was surprised, having thought that she had told him everything long ago. Perhaps he felt the implicit weight of Eli’s name. Molly was thankful that she had never revealed it before so that he could live through the death of his son without the burden of the reasons her family history yearned to provide.

“Why did he kill them?” he said. There was no trace of condemnation in his voice. He reminded her of how Frank, Jr would have asked for the interpretation of a story, with the confidence that she knew and that she would tell.

Molly closed her eyes and thought about Eli out there on the plains and made up the story, how he had been a scout for the railroad, and the days were long and so powerfully bright that cool shade was a fairy story. And the light seemed to come from everywhere—the heavy blue sky, the sharp line of horizon, the lime-green grass that was too thick to part room for a tree. It came from the whites of their eyes and their own sunburned skin until they were crazy blind with brightness. They made lame tents with a tarp and crooked, wind-tamed trees, a covering that did no more than wash one shade out of the light. They sat underneath in the dulled yellowness and played cards until they

thought they saw the images of spades and clubs in the shadows of the grass and in the old, ashy fire.

She told him that what saved Eli from going crazy was when they found a buffalo herd. He had a good horse that ran him ahead of the other men until all he saw was prairie and animals, green and brown running before him, blue sky constant above, and wind filling up his ears. He was the only man alive. He felt more than heard the pounding of the hooves against prairie, moving up beside the buffalo so fast it was slow. The gun in his hand was a part of his arm. Each time he squeezed the trigger it was as though he held out his finger at arm's length and pushed a beast down. Down, down, as easy as knocking whiskey bottles off a fence. When he emptied his guns, he pulled short his gray and let the herd rush by him, so loud and heavy he thought they would pound the earth into bits. He walked his horse back the way he'd come, taking his time to pass by the buffalo that lay like the fat, earthy roots ripped out of the ground when twister winds blow trees down. He counted them all, added them to his tally, and looked at his gun hand.

Johanna had told her that Eli lived to be ninety-three. He had sunken cheeks that pulled his face away from his eyes so that they seemed huge, always wide open. He walked with a cane and from time to time he swung it around him, or stopped short, turned and beat the air behind.

"The dead buffalo, they followed him forever after that, pushing at his back with big white noses, rubbing up against him, making him smell like old smoke."

"Is that true?" said Frank.

"Yes," she said. "It's a family curse. We're all haunted by dead buffalo."

Frank smiled, amused or relieved of the tension of waiting. He kissed her, cheerfully, like he hadn't since the boy died, and Molly put her head on his chest and fell asleep. And whoever was outside aiming in must not have seen her there, lying still, her hair over her face, and so when the bullet came it was so close she heard its sting. It cracked the glass, cleaner than the brick had been, making a hole and rings like a pebble does to a pond. His head leaned back and he slouched on the sofa like he was just too tired to sit. She pulled him down flat and held his face, but he was already dead. So she kissed his forehead again and again.

She said, "I'm sorry you could die."

"I'm sorry I didn't make you live."

"I'm sorry I wasn't smart enough to keep you alive."

There was pain, more real than her own skin, and she sobbed it out through her throat in rich bursts. But there was sudden comfort, too, that she wasn't smart enough, that she was, after all, a small thing. And then again his death felt clean, like cutting your hand smoothly with a brand new knife or swimming in an icy river. Maybe it was the dogs that had gone quiet. Or his hand in hers that was still warm. Or a moment ago when she had been asleep on his chest and that first image of a dream that still lingered, of all those buffalo running away, over a rise, blending in and out of air and disappearing like moving smoke.

## Treasure House

Our new house smells like other people's things. It's old and white and doesn't have good climbing trees and not at all like our other one. Donna says she hopes the house will help us be a happier family. There's the word "Flangee" scraped into the wood above the back door, like it still belongs to somebody else. I don't like the smell and wonder what Tammy thinks, but I don't say anything about it all day while we're moving in boxes, so now Dad and Donna are in bed, and we're in our new room, lights out.

"What's the smell?" I say. Tammy is good with smells.

"Old, what the Flangees left behind. Like old clothes in smelly closets. Like Grandma. Like that rotting woodpile at Great-Uncle Albert's."

I wait for more.

"The Flangees used to live in this house," she says.

I want to know how she knows.

"Why else would they come back here?" she says.

I want to go back to the yellow house with all those raspberry bushes by the fence and our bedroom by the kitchen. That was two houses ago.

"Have you seen them?" I say. She doesn't answer so she probably sleepy.

\*

After school, we play Chinese jump rope and use a fire hydrant instead of somebody cause there's no kids on our street. Tammy wants to stay outside today because she sees Dad get home and he's not right. She can tell when he's been at the tracks.

"Dinner," says Donna from the porch.

“Guess like she feels like being motherly today,” says Tammy

“Yeah, like she’s a real mom.” I feel kind of bad badmouthing our stepmom cause she really tries hard sometimes, but I don’t want to say anything to Tammy. We walk back to the house and on the porch Tammy puts out her pinky

“It’s an unsettling night,” says Tammy. Tammy has feelings that tell her when to be careful around Dad. She likes the word “unsettling.”

“I’ll be quiet,” I say. We shake pinkies and kick each other’s shins. Tammy knows when I take a pinky promise I keep it and that I won’t talk much now until our bedroom. Tammy was right, cause Dad’s lying on the sofa with a big cushion over his face, like he’s a rectangle-head man. I appreciate it when he’s calm, and I stick my head under his cushion and give him a kiss on the cheek. Even Tammy knows he likes me best. Mrs. Brown when we lived in Florence told me that the demon was riding him like he was a horse, riding him hard, and sometimes I look real closely at Dad and see him sort of hunched over like there really is somebody sitting on his back whipping him and kicking him on. It’s one thing I never tell Tammy

Donna and me and Tammy, we whisper all night. We go upstairs and Tammy lets me sleep in her bed, like she does on Christmas Eve.

“You know the Flangees, Panda?” she says. I forgot about them, but I nod.

“They’re buried in the backyard, and at night they rise out of their graves,” she says, “and creep up to our windows and watch us sleeping. They are quick, and when you open your eyes they blow away like dandelion whites.” I look out the window. “Pretend you’re asleep, then open your eyes fast,” she says, “look fast, Panda. Maybe you’ll catch them.”

I'm not going to believe her just because she is one year and three months older, but I look hard. The sky is so dark it scared away the stars, like Donna says.

"Boo," Tammy says. I jump up and hit her accidentally in the face, maybe in her eye. We hear a noise down the hall and I quick hop into my own bed.

"You OK, Tammy?"

"Bugger of a slap, you got," she says. She fake laughs. I don't apologize cause she hates it when I apologize. I thought Dad was coming, but he doesn't come and I don't fall asleep. I'm thinking about the Flangees. I shut my eyes tight so that my skin wrinkles like an old lady's when I feel it with my fingers. I don't pull the covers over my head cause I don't want Tammy to think I'm a sissymary. It's quiet enough to hear the driving noises outside that sound like wind or the bed noises down the hall. I feel something touch my face and I open my eyes quick. Nothing there. Maybe it was a spider or a hair, but maybe not, and my heart's beating fast now

\*

Dad lost two hundred dollars today. Donna keeps saying, two hundred dollars, and Dad says, you shouldn't've made me mad last night, or I wouldn't have gone down there today, and Donna says, we moved in the first place because you said the tracks were so close to the plant that you couldn't help yourself and now you go anyway. Tammy was so mad at him for lying. He promised he'd never gamble again. He's been better since the move and even played catch with us Saturday. He played ball in high school. There's a picture of him in the dining room in a uniform and a mustache, skinnier and kind of looking like Tammy. Sometimes I steal it and put by my bed.



I can't sleep. I'm thinking about this house and how it smells and it's just wrong, and I remember the Flangees, whose house this is. I hear Tammy roll over and I say, "Tammy, tell me a story about the Flangees."

She doesn't say anything for so long I think maybe she's asleep, then she starts whispering, so quiet, it's like hearing the TV from another room. "Old Mr Flangee hated everyone, but mostly he hated his leg. It had gotten blown off in the Civil War and he hated anyone who looked at his leg, or smiled at him, or ran around like he couldn't."

"Which side was Mr. Flangee on, Tammy, North or South?" Tammy is learning all about the Civil War in sixth grade and she tells me about it.

"South. He hated his wife cause she had two good legs and sometimes she went walking in the park with their daughter and he'd sit on the front porch and yell at them, say, 'get me some food, bitch,' or 'don't spoil the brat,' or 'catch a pigeon for dinner.' Always yelling so the whole neighborhood thought the Flangees were trashy no good. They were poor cause he never worked on account of his leg. He used to say, 'I'm so hungry I could eat my leg,' and laugh rude-like."

"What'd he do that was mean? Just yelling and stuff?"

"Panda, don't interrupt. One day he brought home some meat and said, 'Cook this up for dinner,' and slapped it down on the table really hard and fell asleep in his chair. Well, Mrs. Flangee cooked it, and it wasn't until they ate it all that he laughed and said, 'Good dog. Yes, sir, mighty good dog.' And they had eaten the neighbor's dog for dinner."

"Oh, oh, that's rotten. That's rotten and mean." There's a dog next door, a little black one. Once I made him out of clay at school.

“Ate it up, tail and all, and the little girl, she cried when she found out, and she sounded like a little dog howling at the sky ”

Tammy lifts her head and howls a little. I laugh under the covers. “You girls sleep when you’re supposed to sleep,” Dad says from down the hall.

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Dad takes us to the state fair We go on the last night cause he says that’s when people give away free stuff. A woman says Tammy’s an angel child and gives her a clip that has feathers longer than her hair, and Donna clips it to her barrette. Dad throws three balls through a wooden clown’s mouth and wins me a purple elephant. He only got two through the second time or he could’ve gotten Tammy a matching elephant or a pink bear. We go on the carousel and they go on a swan boat down the Love Canal, and we can see them kissing and Tammy whistles at them cause she whistles loud. I wish we’d gone home then because Dad’s found the casino tent.

“I’m lucky today, honey,” he says. Donna doesn’t want to kiss him anymore. “Five minutes,” he says.

Tammy and I use the last tickets looking at a giant alligator. He’s in this really tight pen that’s filled with water and smells like poached-eggs-on-toast. “Hello,” says Tammy. She waves and stands there waiting for him to look, but I can see he’s blind or something cause his eyes are white like creamy marbles and he just stares. Once he tries to wave his tail and it hits against the wood and makes a loud thud. He just doesn’t have enough room.

“Were you scared?” says Donna when we come out.

“No,” we say

She goes and looks through the tent flap. I can see Dad watching something on a screen and he's standing real still and his face is splotchy red.

"Bastard," says Tammy. She dropkicks my blue elephant then chases it and kicks it again. I think, maybe he'll win. Last time he won he carried me around on his shoulders singing about good times rolling and we all went out for cheeseburgers. Donna goes into the tent but comes out again real fast and wants to take us home and leave our Dad. No way. Donna's not even our mom so no way we leave our dad. We sit on the rail by the alligator pen until my seat hurts.

"Come on," Dad says. He doesn't look at us but starts to walk to the parking lot. I run up to him and grab his hand. He pulls it away.

We're in bed. Tammy breathes loud and I think she's getting ready to tell me I'm stupid for trying to hold his hand.

"Don't be mad, Tammy," I say real fast.

"Remember how Mr. Flangee killed the dog?" she says. I don't say anything and hope I'm lucky.

"Mr. Flangee brags to the neighbor, 'I ate your dog.' Man, the neighbor is pissed, but he can't prove it to the police. A cat is missing the next week and everyone thinks, it's the Flangees again. At school, the kids call the little girl Dog Eater and Puppy Butcher.

"One night Mr. Flangee wakes up the house screaming and screaming! Little girl goes in there and sees the bed is all bloody and her dad's other leg is gone. No one's in the house. Just the little girl and Mrs. Flangee standing there wondering where his leg has

gone. The doctor comes and sews him up and the neighborhood is all talking about it, but nobody knows.”

We hear something down the hall. I’m not sure if it’s the Flangees or Dad. He was on a roll tonight, yelling and stomping.

“Don’t stop,” I say For a second, I don’t care if we get caught.

“One night,” Tammy whispers even quieter, like I didn’t already have goosebumps all over my neck, “Mrs. Flangee makes dinner after her husband is all healed up. He says, ‘Mm, best dog I ever ate,’ and ‘mighty fine cat stew, missus.’ ‘That’s not cat or dog,’ says Mrs. Flangee. ‘You just ate yourself a first rate right leg.’”

“No, no. Mrs. Flangee?”

“Mrs. Flangee couldn’t take it and she hacked off her own husband’s leg while he was asleep and put it in the freezer, then cooked it for dinner with mashed potatoes and leg gravy ”

Donna comes in quick and the door slams against the wall.

“Your father is in no mood for this tonight,” she says. She looks like she’s been crying but it’s not our fault. When Donna leaves I close my eyes and pretend to sleep, and it’s been awhile, maybe I am close to numb sleep when I feel something pull my toe. I sit up in bed in time to see Tammy hop into hers.

“It wasn’t me,” she says. “I saw, it was one of the Flangees, the little one, pulling you out of bed, outside to play ”

“Oh, yeah?” I say “I think it was you.”

“She had enormous eyes, blue eyes, and a thick blue shadow that was bigger than her that she carried over her shoulder like a heavy bag, and short black hair like a China

doll.” Tammy turns over on her side, away from me. “And she was crying, without noise, but crying so hard I thought she’d lose her eyeballs. Believe me if you want to.”

I try to go back to sleep. I almost think I see something, maybe it’s the little girl, standing straight in the corner. Maybe Tammy jumped into bed because she was scared. It could have been a Flangee trying to tell me this is their house and I don’t belong.

\*

The next time Dad screwed up was when Tammy finished the story. He came home and sat down like he was a big old fat man, thump, really heavy like all his clothes were wet, and I wanted to cheer him so I sat on his lap but he pushed me off, but not hard, and then I knew. I looked around real fast, and Tammy was looking at me. She saw what I did. Dad was quiet mad, and didn’t eat anything.

“I’m going to sell the car,” he says.

“It’s my car,” says Donna. “You touch it and I’ll leave you.”

“Going back to Nehir Regmi? Back to Mr. Burger King? How about your loving daddy?”

Donna slaps him and he grabs her arm and holds it until she starts shaking.

I want him to hit her. Tammy pulls my wrist and upstairs. We sit on the floor and I set up Monopoly but she kicks it under the bed.

“What about the Flangees?” I say

Tammy starts ripping at the corner of her pillow where all the stuffing’s coming out.

“What do the Flangees do when there’s fighting?” I say.

Tammy keeps picking at the pillow and then she throws it at me. I don't throw it back.

"What about the little girl Flangee?" I say

Tammy shrugs. "The little girl hated her dad who made her eat dog and her mom who made her eat leg. When Mrs. Flangee got out of jail, she was mean and crazy, just like her husband. The girl got out of the house whenever she could and made friends. She fell in love, and when her dad found out he sold their house and made them all move away, further north, where it was always snowy. She was pregnant and had a baby by herself in her bedroom—her mom didn't even get hot water or anything—a little baby girl with white skin and dark hair. It was so cold, the snow fell all around their house until they were trapped. The girl was worried that her baby would starve and so she left to walk through the snow back to a town and get milk, but she was so skinny the wind blew right through her and she froze solid."

"Oh, she died in the snow?"

"Be quiet. The Flangees were hungry so they killed the baby. They ate it, little by little, until it was all gone. Then they cried because there was no more baby and died sitting at the kitchen table."

Tammy steps on a little Monopoly hotel and swears. Then she looks at me like it's my fault. I'm waiting for the rest of the story.

"Then what," I say

She gives me a crusty look.

"That's it?" I say.

“What do you expect, they all decide not to eat each other and be a happy family?”

“That’s a stupid story,” I say. “The girl dies, her parents eat her baby? And then they all die?”

“Why don’t you read the Three Bears,” she says. She throws a book at me, one about unicorns.

“You made up the whole thing. You pretend to know everything but you don’t.”

“You’re such a baby, you’re such a brat.”

“Shut up,” I say. I really yell it, loud.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up.” Tammy says all squeaky and sucks her thumb.

I throw her pillow at her. “Stop it,” I say.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” she says.

I remember Dad and hold my breath, waiting to hear him coming down the hall, but he must still be downstairs. Tammy’s turned her back to me. I try to go to sleep. I think about the picture of the Chinese gazebo in my book, I think about the dancing cow and pig in one of Tammy’s old stories and try to make myself laugh, I think about the Flangees and what they do when there’s yelling.

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Tammy barely has said one word to me all week. I’m sitting on the floor by her bed because if I sit on her bed without her telling me to she’ll kick me right off. She’s reading a book with her flashlight.

“I think I saw the little girl Flangee,” I say. “Under her tree. She has black hair and a big shadow she carries like a Santa Claus sack, right?” I’ve been trying to see them

all week so I can tell her about it, and maybe tell her a story about it. I wish it was OK to apologize. If she tells me another story, I won't get mad just because I don't like the end. Sometimes I'm a big fat baby face.

"Where were you after school?" I know she was at Lara's. She has a friend at school now named Lara who wears make-up and plastic shoes.

"Tell me a story, Tammy."

"Go to sleep," she says.

"Please." I lay down on my bed so she'll know I'm ready.

"Tell me what the Flangees do when there's a full moon," I say. She doesn't say.

"Tell me how they suck blood," I say "Tell me if they float or fly." She keeps reading.

"Do they hurt girls? Are you afraid, Tammy? Did they ever hurt you?"

"Shut up," she says and throws a shoe. It is kind of scary, dodging a flying shoe in the dark. She told me today, she'll be in junior high next year, and I'll have to walk to school alone.

I look around the room, slowly, so my eyeballs barely move. The Flangees have to be here. I look so careful at the dark places out the window that my eyes hurt. If they're real, I know they want me to see them. I'll be able to say to Tammy, the Flangees are back! They want us to play I wait for the pale baby face pressed against the window Or the girl with eyes big as ashtrays who points and cries. Maybe she has a dog, and maybe he's behind the window, howling and licking blood off its chops. Or a woman with long blue hair and two bruised eyes. Maybe she paws at my window, scratching it



with long fingernails, trying to get in. She opens her mouth at me, and she has jagged teeth like she chews on rocks. She hisses at me, mad-like, "Panda, I want your bed."

"Tammy," I say Her flashlight is off. I creep over to the window and look closely, but they're no faces looking in. Not even a crack where a baby Flangee can slip in to bite my fingers. I can't hear Dad and Donna anymore. I pull the blankets over my head.

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I think they're really here. I think they are. I haven't seen them yet, but I think I feel them. Like how you don't see a stomachache. Maybe us talking about them woke them up out of their grave to come watch us through the window. Donna says there's no rest for the wicked.

I have dreams that Mr. Flangee chases me down the hall, walking on his hips and screaming.

I watch Tammy closely now. I want to see if she feels the Flangees moving in, if she is scared. She takes her time brushing her teeth at night, and walking to our room. If she catches me looking at her, she slaps me upside my head and says, "Peepers creepers." I hope she doesn't notice that I run from the bathroom to the bedroom when the lights are off.

"The Flangees are moving in," I tell Donna. I spend as much time as I can in the kitchen, where it's light, since Tammy won't play with me anymore.

"There's no such thing as Flangees, Panda," says Donna.

"I've seen where they're buried."

I shut up now about the Flangees cause Tammy comes back in the room. I give her my cookie and she eats it all at once. It was really cold today so Tammy didn't go to Lara's. I had wanted to wear my new black turtleneck, but Donna said, "No, that goes with your spider costume. You'll get it dirty before Halloween." So I wore my purple sweater with my new purple scarf that I got when I turned nine in July. I'm so cold I keep the scarf on all afternoon. Twice Tammy's taken the ends and tied me to a chair, but that's OK cause it's kind of like we're playing. I don't know why it's so cold. Maybe the gas is turned off, like last time.

Dad gets home and sits down, so Donna and Tammy come sit at the table again while he eats.

"How much you lose?" says Donna, real sarcastic. But Dad thumps the table so loud Donna almost falls out of her chair. I know that Tammy wants to leave, but she doesn't. We all sit there and I think something's bad. I look at Tammy but she ignores me. Then Dad starts cussing and thumping and Donna starts sweating.

"Donna, don't you look at me..."

"I'm not looking..."

"I can't take this kind of..."

"I'm not even looking at you..."

"You should just thank god I'm not my father. You don't know what hell is."

"Just shut up! You're such a liar, you're always lying, just shut up!" Tammy's screaming at him, her face all red and I want to drop under the table. Dad stands up and he's screaming back and Tammy's still screaming but she's backing away now, and Dad starts poking her chest, hard. You ungrateful little baby, you want to dance with me? You

want to be all grown up and fighting? And then Donna's stepping up and grabbing Dad, and Dad's pushing her out of the way, and everyone's so mad, and Dad's pushing, and Donna's bent over, and he grabs her by her hair and, slam. A crack breaks in the wall and runs out from her head three different ways. A big chunk comes loose.

Dad looks like he's gonna throw up. He's breathing hard, now

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The house is quiet. Donna's in the hospital and Tammy's playing at Lip Gloss Lara's. Outside is really cold but it's really sunny like it's summer. I sit on a chair and stare at the hole in the kitchen wall. The cracks look like they're getting longer, like a giant spider stretching its legs. I measure them with my school ruler to see if they really are growing farther and father out from the hole. 18 inches, 13 inches, and 9. I write it down in my notebook and keep watch. The hole just sits like the wall has a mouth. It makes me think of those baby birds that always have their beaks open and heads up, squeaking for food. I borrow Tammy's flashlight, a pen-sized that she won last year in her fifth grade read-a-thon, and look down into the wall. There's a glint.

"Tammy," I say when she gets home, "what would you do if you discovered a treasure that the Flangees left behind?"

"Keep it."

"But, what if it was buried or something. Would you get it out? I mean, wouldn't you be worried that you would make them mad?"

Tammy jumps on my bed and holds a pillow over my face. This hurts and I kick her off me, but I hope she isn't mad. She lets me breathe.

"I'll show you," I say, "but I found it first, so you have to share it."

We get her flashlight and walk so quietly down the hallway I'm sure the Flangees can't hear us. This is the first time after the Flangees came back to their house that I've walked down the hall after bedtime. One night I had to pee in the closet, but I don't think Tammy found out. We walk by Dad's room. I think I see that bruised-woman's face in the door open her mouth like she's about to scream. My heart thumps so hard I put my hand against it to quiet it down. He's snoring in there. Past his door, and now we go quick down the stairs and into the kitchen. I stand on a chair to get the right angle and point the light into the wall. There is the glint.

"From the Flangees," says Tammy. I found it and named it. I think she'll like me again.

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We've been trying to get into the hole in the wall this whole week Donna's been gone. Since her arms are longest, Tammy tries first. She sticks her arm down, shoulder in the hole and face smooshed against the wall. She reaches deep, with prongs even, and she scratches her arm on the broken wall. We poke it with a long stick to try and guess its size and weight. A man at the state fair last year tried to guess my weight for a dollar and I got a plastic airplane kit I gave to Tammy. I look skinnier than I am. The treasure is bigger than the hole, so we scrape away at it, Tammy with Donna's fingernail file and me with a butter knife. We only do a little each day so that he won't notice. I sweep up the gray dust we make with the dust buster. We are as careful as birds.

When the hole is big enough, Tammy gathers up stuff—a straightened hanger, tape, gum, elastics. We build a cool wire arm that was my idea. She tells me knock-knock jokes again and everything almost like old times.

“It looks like a box,” she says. She looks down the hole. Very slowly she pulls up the hanger arm. The treasure is balanced on the bent end.

“Don’t bump me,” she says.

I hold the flashlight. I hold my breath. It’s almost there. The front door opens and she drops it back down. I get scared and stuff the tape and hanger in my shirt. Tammy runs to our bedroom, and I follow, tripping up the stairs.

“What are you running around the house for,” he yells.

“Nothing,” we say. I feel the breath of the little girl Flangee on my neck, chasing me all the way to our room. I don’t stop until I’m safe on my bed under the blanket.

“Damn,” says Tammy. I don’t dare lift up my blanket. Now the Flangees know we found their treasure. I wonder if the blue-haired woman is stooping over my bed with her bruised face. I’m not scared of her anymore, not of seeing her, but the wire punched a small hole in my chest and there’s a dot of blood coming through my shirt. Who knows how a Flangee will react to blood?

It seems like I spent the whole day waiting for school to end and pushing my stomach to make it stop moving. Tammy and I meet at our old place at recess, behind the bushes by the crossing tunnel. Tammy hasn’t told anyone, even Lara, about the treasure. We have a secret together again, a sisters’ secret.

“I bet it’s got pearls inside and rubies,” says Tammy.

“Maybe a tiny diary of one of the Flangees,” I say. I’m beginning to think better of the Flangees, because of the treasure. Maybe they left it just for me to make things good again.

I know it's our last chance. Dad said that Donna is coming back tomorrow. We run home from school, trying to beat each other to the door. I see his truck in the driveway and a dark blue car parked in front.

"Tammy, someone's here," I say. She's already opened the front door.

"Come in, Tammy, Panda," he says.

We stop dead in the doorway. He's home, sitting in the living room chair, wearing his suit. It's the one he bought for Grandpa's funeral last year. There are two women in dresses sitting up straight on the couch, one is old and the other is huge. She's twice as big as Aunt Cathy. I think about Aunt Cathy and her smelly breath and stupid kids, think of anything else in case the women can read my mind and decide to snatch the treasure away from us. Aunt Cathy's breath. Smelly kids. Funeral suit.

"Come on in, sit and talk a minute," he says.

He's sweating a little, but he smiles. He looks like he really wants us to come in, like he wants to hug us or something. Tammy walks real fast over to the couch stool and I follow her so close I step on her heel. We sit, cross our ankles and hold our hands tightly in our laps. I know they will talk to us, and I know exactly how they will sound. They're the same every time.

"Hello, girls," says the old one.

"Hello," we both say.

The fat one asks if we've been to the hospital. She's talking babyish to us. We lie. We haven't been yet, but I'm sure Dad wants us to say we have, and all of a sudden I want to help him. He's our dad. Who are they? I look at Tammy. She is such a good liar. I hope my face looks as believable as hers. I nudge her leg secretly with mine and she

nudges back, and that feels good. Things are still OK. Dad's hands are sweaty, I think, cause he wipes them on his tie a lot.

"Panda, how do you feel about what's happened?" says the old one.

I freeze. She's trapped me. How can I talk about Donna and about that night, without thinking about the wall? I clear my mind so she can't read it. I am not Panda, I'm a dead person. I look like spiders' webs, move around the room in the corners, up and down, floating above her head.

"Alright," I say. The woman opens her mouth to ask something else, to hunt me down with questions like a scorpion I saw on TV that stung again and again until the baby bird was dead.

"Can I get some water?" says Tammy. He actually looks happy she said that.

"Why don't you both go and get some drinks and cookies for the ladies as well," he says.

We take off to the kitchen fast as cats.

"It's still OK," I say, "we can get it out tonight, when he's asleep." It's for me and Tammy, and we'll keep it always and never be apart and hold it, keep it secret, talk about it at recess behind the bushes. I'm so excited that my stomach hopscotches.

Tammy doesn't say anything. She's standing still, looking at the wall. Something's not right. I don't look, I'm afraid I'll see a Flangee face staring at me through the hole, or something worse. I try to imagine something worse.

The hole is gone. Just gone. The cracks are gone. Dad's done a good job, but I can still see where the paint is new and there's a bump where the hole was. I bet he's nervous that they'll see the hole, that they'll think, Donna didn't slip down the stairs. She broke

the wall with her head. There's something wrong in these people's house. He didn't know about the treasure. He's hiding the hole.

"Oh," I say "Oh."

I'm so stupid, I know, but I'm still thinking of how we can bust into the wall. And I'm so scared I want to cry, and I'm not scared of the Flangees. Tammy pulls her arm back and hits the wall real hard. Twice, hard. I grab her hand to see if she hurt it, but she pulls it away.

"What can we do?" I say

She hits it again.

"Tammy, what should we do now?"

"What's that noise, girls?" says Dad from the other room.

"I know what was in that box," says Tammy. She's staring off at the refrigerator, but not at it at all, like she's blind as the giant alligator "It belonged to the little girl Flangee, Panda. Her treasure things, like a thick purple ribbon and a silver pendant, and a see-through stone that isn't glass. And best of all, wrapped up secret in a paper towel, is a ring that I read about that makes you invisible. You put it on and someone can be looking right at you, but you can just walk away."

"I would've shared it with you," I say.

"We'll get it out, some other time."

"Yeah," I say

I'm not going back in there. Dad may come and get us, but too bad. Tammy's got white paint on her knuckles and in her hair. I can't stop my chin from trembling.



## Called Her Catwalk

She was christened Catrina Celeste, and it was her dad who first gave her nickname. She danced for him in a pink thrift store tutu and he applauded and chanted, “Cat, Cat, Cat.” His attention was more precious to her than bowls of candy. He was always drunk, then. She was six when he died. Celeste was after her paternal grandmother who had dressed up as a man and fought in France in 1917. As she grew up, she was Cat to everyone else and Celeste to herself secretly. In junior high they called her Catwalk because she was so tall, a supernatural 5’11” at age thirteen. Natural consequence—dancing with boys whose eyes came to her chest and hands rested just on her rounding hips. She felt more than awkward, but wondered, hoped, that they liked it.

Too much height brought her too much isolation, and Cat began to daydream about Grandma Celeste. (The platoon sits close around one fire, guarding the light, letting their backs be a wall to the heavy blue cold. Her shoulder is pressed against another soldier’s, a man with a quiet mouth and eyes like the blue part of a flame. If only he knew what lovely thing sits so close. The commander looks as grim as his dusty boots. He speaks quietly about the danger of this mission, the pitch night, heart throbbing, cold water danger that is their one hope to save France. Celeste steps forward, a tall, slender shadow against orange fire. ‘I am afraid,’ she says, in a voice like Ingrid Bergman’s, ‘but I will do it, and I will not fail.’)

When they started their freshman year, some kids noticed that Cat was no longer all sticks like a newborn colt, but was suddenly beautiful. Boys were anxious to dance with her now, their eyes at her breasts and hands comfortable, moving on her waist and

around. And Cat didn't slap their hands away. The attention felt good like a warm bath. Girls thought she was arrogant with all that height. Six feet one at age fifteen, she should be slouching, letting her neck curve to her shoulders and down, vertebrae by vertebrae, saving her two or three inches. But she stood straight, boldly reaching all vertical seventy-three.

Cat kept track of the early years by boyfriends. First was Justin, a month long, fourteen-year-old romance that was a secret. He had washed the dishes at a summer camp for girls from low-income families—Camp High Hopes. He was tan and wore soccer shorts and socks pulled up over his thick calves. She slipped out of her cabin at night and found him outside the lodge whittling a stick like a mountain man. It rained, and they huddled together in the pantry, sat on economy-sized packs of toilet paper and made out slowly.

The next day, she was stamping leather pouches at the crafts table and when she glanced up he was watching her. He looked without shame, his hands in his pockets, his head cocked, as though he were listening to a bird. His look made her want to kiss him until her lips were raw. He had lips thick as fingers and smelled like a circus—cotton candy and a crowd. She looked for him watching her wherever she went—eating, playing volleyball, walking from the shower cabin in just a towel. She met him most nights in the dark and they kissed and they kissed. He believed that if he had sex with a girl that wasn't Catholic his penis would fall off like a bee's stinger. At the time she didn't want anything except his lips and hands and eyes.

Phillip Maestes came next. They were biology classmates, and he watched her from across the room all quarter. He called her every night. He went to her basketball

games and shouted her name—when she made a play, when she was fouled, and at awkward moments like during the free throw of another team member “Cat! Cat!” He yelled, desperate, like he was trying to find her in a horror movie. She blushed for him. When they first kissed, Cat thought he was too anxious, disturbed by how heavily he breathed. She avoided it after that, and Phillip didn’t mind. Sometimes to look at her was too much and he wanted to squint or cover her up. Her closeness was like a drug. He felt the buzz of her all day, agitating him, drying his tongue, making sleep difficult.

There was, briefly, a pulse pounding flirtation with her basketball man-coach, when he pulled her hair off the back of her neck and said, “You don’t look sixteen.” She didn’t. She had legs the length of most freshmen boys. Within a few days he was ignoring her completely, eyes averted, hands in his pockets. He’s gone too far in his mind, she thought. And felt gratified.

Carlos was included because he discovered her, and he was a man. When she first met with him in the modeling agency office, Cat noticed how he looked at her face, when he dropped his gaze to her breasts, her legs, seeing her whole body. Women didn’t pay attention to her like that. They only looked at other women to see themselves—she’s taller than me, her hair’s shorter than mine, her nose is longer than mine. Men looked at her and saw her. Cat checked in at the agency daily at Carlos’ request and hung around, made the coffee. Sometimes she sat on his desk while he made important phone calls. She twisted his hair into ringlets with a pencil. He put his hand on her knee. He was forty, married. It didn’t seem to matter. They were, after all, in the business of sexy. When he sent her off to Milan for a summer (which turned into two years), there was a touching of lips and a drama of good-bye that didn’t enter either one of them too deeply

A year later, her mother came to visit. “Hello, hello,” she said. She waved like an American—like she waved a flag. Cat rushed her from the airport to the apartment. She had sent home money she got from the Italian ELLE cover, meaning it to catch up the mortgage.

“But I’ve always wanted to see Italy,” said her mother

She hugged her, and Cat held still to receive it. She hadn’t been touched since Carlos, and she realized that she knew her mother’s smell, not perfume or detergent, but the realness of her skin. This made her want to cry

Her mother went sightseeing alone while Cat was on go-sees. The Duomo, La Scala Opera House, but she was impatient to see more of her daughter and this crazy, charming magazine world. She went to a photo shoot in a photographer’s studio. Cat was naked under a man’s white business shirt, lying on her side, her neck arched towards the camera. It was an ad for men’s watches. Her mother stepped up and adjusted the neckline a little lower

“You’ve got such lovely breasts,” she said.

Cat’s neck turned red, and the photographer paused until the blush drained.

There were men in Italy, and later Japan, that just looked at her. Italian men who leaned out of doorways in those early yellow mornings to watch her jog by Japanese businessmen in the subway who peeked at her from behind their pornographic comic books to imagine what a woman so tall looked like unclothed. She took their looks and kept them to herself, busy with the industry of being beautiful. She made the cover of the Italian ELLE and a Japanese TV spot for oranges, for which she got promoted to New

York where she lived off canned tomato soup and brown rice for eight months. New York mornings were gray and dry of men to rise early just to watch her jog.

Cat stopped getting attention, and stopped getting work. She felt so tired, sick, too tall, like her body wasn't made to be vertical pushing upwards on gravity, to walk in high heels, stand still, turn, turn, raise your chin, lower your chin, part your lips, just a little, too much, pout, look at me, just past me, look harder, look harder

Her first job in New York was thanks to Reed, a chubby man her age who followed her around the fitness club. He turned out to be the son of a man in business and she was hired. The shoot was in Washington Square on a windy day in workout spandex while Reed's mustached father poured bucket after bucket of cold water over her head. The photographer called for a ten-minute break so Cat could stop crying. She sat on the grass, trying not to breath like her esophagus was full of holes and watching the photographer watch the sun to gauge the daylight left. I want out, she thought. (Celeste crouched low behind the brambles, breathing fear in and out until her lungs rattled like castanets. She prayed that guard, pacing only a few feet away, couldn't hear. Raindrops big as crabapples gathered in the branches and fell on her like bombs of coldness. Exhausted and wet, the front of her uniform ripped from running, if she was caught, it would be impossible to hide the fact that she was a woman. Celeste tried to dry her palm on her wet pant leg, gripped her knife, and stood to face the guard.)

Eventually, she met Paul. This was two years later, after she was famous, the day her face appeared on the cover of Cosmo for the third time.

“Hello,” she said. She put out her hand, but he went for the cheek kiss, which, as she had learned, is the proper greeting if you’re already acquainted, or on television. She smiled. “I hear you’re the new hot young thing.”

“The rumor goes,” he said.

There was a director there, some other actors, some that were just rich and others that were just clever. She fit in with the group that was just beautiful, though they were careful not to stand near. The duty of the beautiful is to spread themselves out for aesthetics. Besides, they were each carefully aware that too much beauty too close together dims in splendor and becomes ordinary.

The actor and model sat on the love seat and talked idly about people they knew until a clever woman attacked Paul with eager conversation, and Cat was pushed out of his attention. She stood up to dance near the stereo. People around her moved a step back. The gift of the common to the beautiful is a little bit of space. She loved to dance that way, in a crowd, alone, knowing that someone would be watching her and knowing that she was beautiful. Paul was watching. An entertainment magazine editor was present, and the next week their names were paired together in the gossip column.

They met again at another party and took a night walk out to the gazebo on the cinematographer’s private lake. They both wanted everything. They both wanted to go all the way. It came about naturally to agree to a sort of publicity love affair, using the relative fame of the other to heighten their own. He looked good standing near her and she looked better on the arm of a man. They laughed about it, and she even giggled once, and at the end of the night they spoke newly intimate good-byes in the hearing of the other guests. He kissed her on the cheek, avoiding the thick layer of lip-gloss she had just

applied. What a strange thing, she thought, that lip-gloss is meant to attract and at the same time repels. She wondered if she was the same way with men. But she went home smiling, and when she lay down to sleep, she almost sighed.

They held hands at the premier for his new movie and kissed for the *People* photographer. He spoke sheepishly about her on the *Late Show* and was seen on the front row of a runway show. There was talk of going on vacation together to see Paris, her grandmother's land, or maybe the Bahamas and just lie still in the sun for hours.

"Not yet," she said. "We're on a roll. We can't take a break."

Cat was given a small role in a Brad Pitt movie and spent a month in LA. From there she did another *Cosmo* cover and then co-hosted the Miss Teen USA pageant. A car commercial followed a soft drink contract. Her picture was on the cover of *Redbook*: "The Face That Can Sell a Thousand Ships." *Entertainment Weekly*: "Purrrrr—What Cat's Got." *Maxim*: "Our Favorite Feline."

Paul was in town between projects and they spent the Fourth of July at a club in Long Island. Several big names were there, including a director Paul was courting. Cat made a good show for him, smiling and posing absent-mindedly by the fruit bowl. She kissed Paul's cheek and called him "Osito," a nickname she had heard a Spanish woman in Milan call her husband. She dazzled them on the tennis court and they beat the director and his wife at doubles. It was a clear afternoon, fresh, as though spring had begun again in the middle of summer.

That evening they sat on the golf course lawn and watched local fireworks battle above their heads. She could feel Paul was looking at her, and she held still, letting her

face be a mirror for the sky colors. He touched her cheek with his fingertips, and then her neck. He touched her other cheek and she turned to him.

“Oh, Cat, you’re so beautiful,” he said.

She felt her heart move. The director was nowhere near, no one was close enough to hear. Perhaps he meant it, she thought. He ran his finger down her neck and touched her shoulder as though it were as delicate as porcelain. He touched her skin meaning to touch her soul, and it went inside her. When Cat drove back to Manhattan, she turned off the radio, listened to the wind push against the car, and thought about falling in love with Paul.

“Better than being looked at is being touched.” She spoke out loud, as though it was too meaningful for silence. She was hungry to see him again. She wanted to tell him something wonderful, something that couldn’t be unsaid. Do something dramatic. He went out of town the next day. A week later she was in Los Angeles to do a late night talk show plug for the Brad Pitt movie. A vase of Easter lilies was in her hotel room with a note—*love, Paul*. She picked up the phone to call him and realized she didn’t have the number.

Cat was in a supermarket near the hotel because she was craving unsalted topsaltines when she saw her picture on a tabloid. The headline read, “‘Cat Was My Teenage Love.’ Supermodel’s First Tells Erotic Details.” Inset was the snapshot of her and Phillip Maestes his father had taken. Phillip was looking at her and she was looking into the lens and smiling. Cat was surprised to see herself so in control of the camera even back then. She read the article standing in the Express Lane. “Supermodel Cat’s conquest of actor Paul Schenk is only the latest in a long line of torrid love affairs, beginning with Spokane



native Phillip Maestes, with whom she shared many wild nights at the tender age of sixteen,” etc. Cat rolled up the magazine as if to strangle it away. She had worked so hard. She had sat on the ground in Washington Square, soaking wet, with blue lips and numb fingers, and stood back up again. She had earned enough to pay off the family debts and buy her mother a hill house and a BMW. She had visited thirty states in three months, cutting ribbons and toasting Tigris general managers and dancing with loose-handed nephews. Phillip Maestes was a ghost who should not be allowed to touch her. A middle-aged woman was looking at the same magazine in the next lane.

“It’s a lie,” Cat said.

The woman looked up, surprised to have been spoken to, and then looked down when she recognized Cat.

“I never slept with him. He was a casual boyfriend 6 years ago. I never had sex with him.”

“OK,” said the woman. She didn’t look up. Cat was used to the non-famous not making eye contact.

“Wouldn’t that make you angry, if an old boyfriend made intimate lies about you public? What would you do?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t.” She put down the magazine and looked at the floor.

“I’m sorry I bothered you,” she said. She tried out a self-conscious laugh. “I don’t usually talk to strangers.” She left her saltines and walked quickly away.

That afternoon a car took her to the studio. She wore a Chanel black dress, basic, she thought, not a statement, flattering, flirtatious, respectable first appearance-wear. Two hours after arriving, she was finally introduced. The audience applauded, some men

hooted. The host told her she looked great. She was grateful. The production manager had phoned the day before and Cat said she had some anecdotes about the making of the movie she could tell. The host led her to those subjects, but it was over too quickly and Cat became conscious that the audience was quiet. She wasn't interesting enough. Maybe they were thinking, models should be seen and not heard. The host asked her what it had been like growing up beautiful.

"Oh, I wasn't beautiful," she said. "I was six feet tall at age fourteen, can you imagine?" Some noise from the audience. "Size twelve shoes. I was a freak." Cat laughed with the audience. The idea of a model being ugly was funny. "I had no friends."

"What a change, huh?" said the host. "Now you probably have to beat off eager friends with a stick."

"Yeah," she said. She had nothing else to say.

"Your name—Cat—is that a nickname?"

"Short for Catrina. My dad started calling me Cat when I was a little girl. I was really grateful to him for the nickname when the girls in high school used to meow and hiss at me." Sarcasm. No reaction from the audience. She needed them to laugh again.

"My middle name is Celeste, after my grandmother. She was a unique woman. French. She dressed up as a man and fought in World War I."

"No kidding," said the host. "Did she see some action?"

"Well, some action, but not much fighting. They found her out right away. She didn't know they all stripped down and bathed in the same tent. She was kicked out after being there a week." Laughter. "But I guess she had something good to offer because one of the officers in her unit married her." Laughter.

“If she looked anything like you, he was no doubt one of the men in the bathing tent,” said the host.

More laughter. Cat couldn’t force a smile. What a coward, she thought. I’m selling my grandmother’s story for a laugh. The host made another joke about her grandmother and she laughed. Stop it, she told herself. Stop it before you lose everything.

“There’s a story about me in the tabloids,” she said. It was an awkward transition and the audience’s laughter cut short. “An ex-boyfriend gives the sordid details of our supposedly erotic love affair. It’s a lie. I never slept with him.” The host nodded, expecting her story to have a punchline. “I’m a virgin,” she said.

The audience wasn’t sure how to react. A few laughed, guessing it was a joke. The host stuttered. “You are? Wow. Huh. No doubt Arab sheiks around the world are making Brooke Shields-bets on that as we speak.”

“Yeah.”

The host was flustered. “That’s something you don’t hear a guest say everyday. Well, how about that. I’m sure you can find some offers from the men in the audience.”

A couple of men hooted. Cat smiled good-humoredly. She was thinking about Paul, if he was watching, if he was angry. This would affect him, she was sure. This would frustrate the virile sexy image he had been working so hard to build, the reason he had wanted to date a model in the first place. She could guess what her agent was saying right now on her voice mail: “You don’t say things like that. You are supposed to be what every woman wants to be. That’s why you sell soft drinks and cars. They want to buy you. No woman wants to be a virgin, no woman wants to be exposed on national TV.”

The host cued up a clip from the Brad Pitt movie and the audience applauded politely. It was a stupid movie and she looked stupid in it, odd, cut out. Her legs hurt with the thought of millions watching her look like a fool. Cat pursed her lips and nodded at the audience. She felt naked, suddenly. Years ago in a runway class, the instructor had told each girl to go home and stand in front of a mirror naked for an hour. Soon she could no longer see her body as a whole. It was parts, a curve, a bump, a blob, the color of old milk, blending into the wall behind her, blending out of herself. She wondered what they saw now, in the powerful stage lights, clear cut, painfully exposed real self. She wasn't fooling anybody. She could play dress-up like Grandma Celeste in her bedroom, but to everyone real, she was a silly little girl. Dizzily, she tried to think of something worthwhile she'd done. The new brand of make-up she spoke for, Tigris, it is a good product, she thought. She genuinely liked their translucent powder and the new line of lip-glosses. Natural ingredients. Not tested on animals. She touched her face. She was wearing Tigris make-up underneath the make-up the show's artist had applied. Shell Ivory base, Plump Plum mascara, Nude Nylon powder. That was where she was, in the make-up under the make-up. At that moment, in the soft leather chair drowning under the lights, that easy thought grounded her and made her feel round and real.

The host was thanking her for coming. "The lovely Cat, everyone," he said.

There was applause and cheering as the show prepared to fade to commercial. She looked at the camera, right into the lens, like she had in that picture Phillip's father took. The lens was a giant eye that absorbed the world, millions of people, unblinking, looking at her. The applause filled her ears like water.

## Judy's Pass

Before you take the turn-off to Judy's Pass, you're thinking of Clay (Your brother who's been serving in Deer Lodge for rape the last four years.) Everything you see—the junk trees growing out of a ditch, the abandoned house painted bordello pink, the Watertower standing tall as if it had open arms—everything smells of Clay. You took off for college the year it all happened and haven't been back since. He'll be here today, paroled, waiting on the couch of your parent's two-bedroom frame house with longish hair and spooky eyes. He'll look up, nod his head in greeting, and you'll both be thinking how you never wrote.

You drive slowly through town. Mabel Allyson's house is on the corner Clay used to rake her leaves and then sit down and talk to her for a good hour. Her house always smelled like taffy. You stick your head out the window and take a whiff but only smell gasoline. Clay loved to talk to the widows. Dad always said he was a ladies' man. But it was a joke. Next door is another of Clay's old haunts. Mrs. Peterson was always at the town bazaar, every year, running the cakewalk. You won once and chose a white cake with fat black cherries because it looked like a wedding. Mr. Peterson collects pictures of the mining days—miners with coal powder smudged on pale-underground skin, like in life they were a black and white photograph, and those old lantern hats on, looking so tired they can't even sit down for the picture they just stand there staring with their eyes empty like the shafts.

The pink house behind the Peterson's is Mrs. and Miss Elderton's place. They have a parrot that says, "Hello there," and "Have some tea," and "Good-bye, little

missy ” Clay spent one whole afternoon trying to teach that parrot to say your names.

“Clay and Irene,” he must’ve said it a thousand times. Clay was so sad when it never worked that you made him soup afterwards like he was sick and you were his mother

The parrot’s name was Madame Bovary

The grade school is mustard brick and empty. It’s getting on towards evening and the bars and jungle gym pull long skinny shadows across the asphalt and remind you of children’s legs—all bone. Clay was in Mr Jones’ fifth grade class when they made up the lyrics of the school song to the tune of “It’s a Small World” and sang it at an assembly.

You were in third grade and wanted to be in Mr. Jones’ class more than anything. The year you were a fifth grader Mr Jones switched to second grade and you had Mrs.

Koerch, the saltine fiend. Clay laughed like it had been his joke. You wince. The air is blowing from the west now and tastes mildly of sulfur. It smells like memories and you roll up the window to ease the sensation.

The tallest elm on the block is where you and Clay found Mr. Sanders hanging. It was November and dark that early in the morning. You were helping Clay with his paper route, wrapped in scarves up to your ears, leaning forward and looking down from the cold, so you almost touched a leg with your shoulder before you saw him and jumped back. You both were quiet and just watched that scene, more gruesome than childhood can comprehend. He was swinging a little, like a heavy branch in a windstorm. There was a little blood coming from his neck where the rope had rubbed him raw, dripping down his collar white collar He was in a suit. What makes a man hang himself outside, for kids to see, for public ignominy? Clay took your hand and said, let’s start the route on the other street. You weren’t scared. You had seen your first dead body, but so had Clay.

There is a climbing tree in front of your house. Unbeknownst to Dad, Clay scraped out a flat place where two branches met to hold soda cans and comic books. You two practically lived there in the summer, pretending to be comfortable lounging on the rigid spine of a branch. You could see into the second story windows of the Blake's and the Kurtz' across the street. The Blakes were boring, an old couple and their son who still lived at home at age thirty Josh. He sat at his computer, shoulders rolled forward toward the screen, and played video games.

One summer, mid-afternoon, when even the leaves seemed hot to the touch, you and Clay sat stubbornly in the tree, thirsty and bored and anxious for something to happen. Josh Blake was sitting in his room playing his games, facing the wall that faced the Kurtz', blinded by a wall to what happened next door. Lindy Kurtz and her boyfriend came crashing into her room. They fell down on her bed, right on top of her pink comforter with the needlepoint throw pillows, and made love half-clothed. You looked away, and laughed, but Clay, his eyes were wide and he was sweating. Lindy pulled off her boyfriend's shirt, and he had a broad, sunburned back.

Mrs. Harvey, on the corner, was one-half Chinese. She had an antique Chinese opium pot and a teacup that she let you borrow for show-and-tell. Mrs. Harvey once heard Clay make a Chinese joke, the one about throwing pans down the stairs to name their kids, and she sat you down in her living room and told stories about her grandpa and grandma, the little, cruel things white miners did to pass a hot, drunk night. Creative things, like putting their murdered cat on their door with its eyes painted shut with tar, slanted-like. Clay cried. Because of Mrs. Harvey you thought opium was a kind of Asian aspirin until you were seventeen.

You and Clay used to do odd jobs around the neighborhood to get some comic book and candy cash. You raked the gray late winter grass and picked pinecones off lawns. One year you cleaned out Mr. Johannsen's basement and he let you take some old Time magazines and pictures of people he didn't recognize anymore. He also had his father's pickaxe. His dad had died from working in the mines, crushed to death, and he told you his mom swore her son would never work in the mine, and he never did, even when they were so broke they ate their stringy old rooster with wild onions.

Clay listened like the stories were hot soup in winter. He loved talking to old-timers about what it was like to be in those shafts all day, breathing dust and barely seeing anything but what their little yellow light circled on the black wall. The dead mines were blocked with boulders like Jesus' tomb. Clay demanded expeditions to break in. He dug from the bottom, and you the top, but a hollow space never appeared. You said, someone was determined to bury these places forever.

One night Clay sneaked out without you and he brought back Mr. Johannsen's father's pickaxe. He said, Look at this beauty, Irene, and he held it in his hands like a doll. The metal spike was dull like used pencil lead, the handle cracked up the middle, bleeding splinters. Clay playfully swung it at the middle of your room, calling out, A vein! More lights! Stuff he thought miners would say.

He said, This is what I would be doing for the rest of my life, if the mine hadn't died.

The mining company came in a century ago, trailing immigrants like loose threads on a sleeve. It gave men a place to sweat and houses in a row by the ridge, then dirty teeth, stooping necks, misshapen hands, blacklung, and blindness. In Sunday School



you imagined hell as dark winding shafts that went deeper down and hopeless men descending in long lines. When coal ran thin the company left the dirty water and a generation of half-buried men. Clay was orphaned by the loss, like without a legacy, he couldn't imagine himself in the future, possible and real.

There's a ghost town here, up by the ridge. When the mine closed, people left, and those that stayed, stayed away from the pits. All those houses lined up together are empty as the shafts. You used to haunt them as a kid, breaking windows and punching through walls, feeling lucky to have a personal Pleasure Island. In the one-story on the end there's a cement wall in the basement covered with carved stars. Tim Harvey said they stood for everyone who lost their virginity in that building. Clay had the idea to start a club there, with Tim, Phillip Bench and the McHales. You all had to cut into your arm, enough to scar, and swear loyalty. You still have a hair-thin white line, a pale twin of the soft crease of your elbow. Phillip was scared, and Clay and the McHales teased him, said that his dad was gay and that Phillip would be too. Phillip's face went red mean and he cut a line, deep, into his arm, and then he howled like an animal.

That was about the last time Clay ever invited you along. Seeing all that blood, making things serious, growing up. He moved out of your shared room and into the unfinished basement with bare concrete walls colder than winter. He tacked up dirt bike racing posters, stole a rag of carpet from a ghost house, and slept on a mattress on the floor. Mom hollered about his basement room for a while, and refused to ever go down there and clean, which was part of Clay's plan. He spent a couple years making pipe bombs with the McHales and blowing up gourds and your old dolls. There's little else for a small town boy with no mine and no war.

Past the ghost town is the Parking Lot, a flat place guarded by scrub oak. It aided Judy's Pass in their claim to the majority of the pregnant girls at Dixon High. The dirt is torn up by tires like kids still come here, even in wet weather. After Clay moved into the basement, you and Tim Harvey used to come out here with a flashlight and shine it through windshields, laughing at those girls stripped to their bras and awkward boys squinting back. Once an angry high school graduate with his pants around his knees threw Tim to the ground and kicked his breath out of his lungs with hard boot tips.

A few years later you and Tim were in the back of his truck trying out what you'd seen with your flashlight. This time, a flashlight shined in your eyes, and it was Clay. He screamed, get out of here, get out of here, and climbed into the truck and knocked Tim in the head a couple of times. You jumped out of the truck and ran home. You still had your shoes on.

When you got to your street, Clay's truck was already there. He dropped down from a tree branch and you could see he was sick mad. He said, You stay away from Tim Harvey. He grabbed your arm. And stay away from that place. He growled, like he'd bite or hit. And, you felt grateful that he spoke to you, that he followed you, that for whatever reason he had tried to save you.

You weren't afraid of Clay. Tim was. And your mom. She waited up for him one night and when he came in smelling like smoke she started screeching. Clay knocked her down with the back of his arm and put his hands around her neck and said, I could kill you. Her body sort of went limp, like she was saying to herself, lie still, play dead, and he'll go away.

And then there was Laurel Grey. It was in the alley behind the dry cleaners that they said Clay raped her. He had black hair, dark eyes, and a body of an athlete, streamline, lovely. Weekends girls with cars drove by the house, slowly, peeking low into the windows and hoping for a glimpse. Everyone knew he could have had any girl in Judy's Pass, so why rape a fifteen-year-old? But he ran, and the police came by the house and searched the basement and the tool shed. They assumed he hitchhiked out of town and the search was spreading farther away from Judy's Pass when you made a call.

You said, check out the ghost town. You said, the house with a cement basement wall carved with stars, the one close to the mouth of the mine. You said, anonymous. And that's where they found him. Asleep in the cellar with Laurel Grey's jacket crumpled up under his head for a pillow.

When Laurel Grey walked up to the courthouse, you spit on her dress. You made a big show, hollering "liar" and "bitch." They wouldn't let you in the trial. Half the town went down to Dixon for it and Judy's Pass was a ghost town for the day. You wandered around, peeking in windows, feeling like a mine ghost, feeling like you didn't have any bones in your skin after what you did, hoping you were dead or had never lived. You were at school when you heard they'd given him seven years in Deer Lodge. A girl you didn't know took your hand and said, I'm sorry. My brother's in Deer Lodge, too. After graduation, you left.

You have memories of the downtown looking like candy in sunset light, and the sun is setting. Today it looks like jewelry. You park and watch the light settle over your old home. The white post office and dairy and watertower looked dipped in gold. Treetops are on fire and shaking in the wind, clouds are dark like the heart of a flame.

Your window is down, and the evening air feels so good on your skin, maybe the best you've ever felt, and you're suddenly very sure that you want this to be your last image of Judy's Pass. Burning up in its own sunset.

Maybe you'll come back at Christmas, when the snow makes a thick curb along the road and the streets are lined with candles in paper bags all the way to the turnpike. You'll be so happy to see Clay then, and he'll come to meet you at the door like you're kids and he beat you home from school. His eyes won't be so haunted by cement and bars then, and he'll play the guitar and you'll sing about the Rocky Mountains and good friends. He'll laugh at your too-short hair and you'll reminisce about the dozens of doll heads he blew up in the gully. But for tonight, just keep on the highway until you find a place to pull over and sleep in the car. They get slow sunsets around here. It'll still be light for another hour if you chase it down.

## A Haunting

One evening they had talked idly of death.

“Would you go to heaven or would you stay on earth?” Jane had said.

“Like Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*?” Paul had said.

“Mmm.”

“Stay.”

“Where would you haunt?”

“People I know, I guess. We’ve moved around too much so there’d be no ancestral house to claim my eternal presence.”

“What about your Grandpa’s farm?” Paul had grown up there. It was the closest thing, in Jane’s mind, to the moors.

“I’m a people attacher, not a place attacher.” He had arched his eyebrows and closed the People magazine they had been reading. His mannerisms said, “You should know that by now ”

A year later Paul died. How isn’t really important, just that it was sudden and unexpected as death takes so many of the world’s youths and leaves the old withering on in their achy way. Cruel. Jane was devastated for several months. She didn’t know what to do with the wedding dress, the white registrar book and feathered pen, or the 500 invitations with double envelopes embossed with roses. In the end, Jane did get some use out of the mess. She was a bride for Halloween that year. Some people thought it was in bad taste, but others nodded their heads and said, “Hm, how practical.” The registrar book was given as a birthday present to her little sister. “It’s a journal,” Jane said. The

invitations were recycled as Christmas cards. She rubber cemented a picture of herself in a red and green sweater over the front to cover up the “Jane White and Paul Stork have chosen the 25<sup>th</sup> of September to seal their love.. etc., etc.” That year, Jane’s cards were sent out in double envelopes. The pen with the big white feather? She kept it on her desk next to her high school graduation mug and a framed picture of Val Kilmer

Before Paul reappeared, Jane had a few metaphysical run-ins with her ex. She smelled his smell one day. It made her pause, but she quickly attributed it to the hot dog stand she had just passed. Another time as she studied in the university library she felt a sensation on her face and was reminded of how Paul used to come up behind her and put his hands over her eyes. She had forgotten how much it annoyed her. How many times had she wanted to scream in his face, “Look, fiancée or not fiancée, my face is my space.” She rubbed a hand over her eyes - it must have been her long bangs brushing against her temples.

Then came the day when she saw Paul’s face, in color, against the trunk of a tree.

“I didn’t see evidence of the narrator’s impartiality,” said the cute guy. They were walking together from the English building to the student union for a bagel.

“I know, Cute Guy,” said Jane. (She actually didn’t call him “Cute Guy” but his real name has been lost to us.) “The text is quite clear on his bias.”

“If only we had a record of what the author...”

“Eeek.” Jane screamed and dropped her books. She stood frozen a moment, and then her hand flew forward and poked the tree.

“Do you see that?” She cringed backwards, her hand curling up on her chest like a wounded animal.

“Yeees,” said Cute Guy “A tree.”

Jane knelt down next to it, inspecting the bark specter up close.

“It’s gone, now ” She rapped the tree with her knuckles. “It came and went. You saw it?”

“The tree?”

“A face.”

“Okay ”

We have to excuse Cute Guy for being skeptical. He had only just met Jane in class and this was going to be their first bagel date. After class she had said, “I liked what you said about the narrator.” He had said, “Thanks. Do you want to get a bagel?” And then she started seeing faces in tree trunks. Cute Guy saw someone he had met once across the plaza, made up important business with him, and disappeared. Jane was left examining the ordinary tree bark and muttering to herself.

I wonder now if Paul would have actually continued the haunting if it hadn’t been for Cute Guy. It is only natural for a departed one to seek out their earthly lover a few times before settling permanently on the other side. Paul perhaps would have passed on quietly after being satisfied that he had reminded Jane of himself. Then he happened to find her on campus that day flirting with an attractive, tangible man, and with the rash judgment of a ghost decided that it had not been long enough.

By the next day, Jane had dismissed the sighting as a result of a No-Dozed homework weekend.

“The text is conscious of the foibles of time and chooses to rewrite time and chronology into the very words which seek to dominate that institution,” said the professor. Some students nodded vigorously, others shot their hands up instantly.

“But professor,” said one, “if we allow the author to play the tyrant with all sense of form and propriety and applaud him for his destruction of the English language . . .”

“Are you trying to be radical and democratic?” said the professor.

The class chuckled. So did Jane, until she noticed that the chalk dust was gathering together on the blackboard into the form of a face. The chalk face opened his eyes, looked at Jane, and said, “Hello.”

Jane didn’t say “eek” this time. She just quickly grabbed her bag and exited the room. She forgot the book they had been studying on the desk. To this day the professor believes that Jane had disagreed so strongly with the novel and the class discussion that she abandoned the book in a demonstrative protest. He gave her an “A”

“I’m insane,” said Jane aloud. She walked with long strides to the parking lot. “They’re coming to take me away, ho ho, hee hee...”

“Ha ha,” said the voice of Paul.

Jane stopped dead in her tracks and threw down her backpack. This was the third time and she was not going to molly coddle this apparition into a spoiled little specter.

“Excuse me?” Her voice was angry but firm. There was no answer. “That’s what I thought,” she said. She picked up her bag and marched off again with a huff. She would not be traumatized by a disembodied voice, or a talking chalk head for that matter. When she got to her car, the door opened for her.

“Thank you,” she said.



All evening, Jane saw a shadow flitting in her peripheral vision. She ignored it. While she cooked spaghetti, it hovered in the dark place above the cereal cupboard. When she worked on the computer, it curled up like a cat on a half-finished afghan project she had abandoned in the corner. When she turned on the nightly news, it got brave and tried to melt into the television screen. Superimposed on top of the figures of the local newscasters appeared a faint outline of a man. It raised its fuzzy arm and waved. She turned off the TV. That final rejection was too much for him. The shadow fled down the hallway and into the unlightable recesses of a storage closet, head lowered and arm shapes hanging dejectedly at its sides.

All night long, Jane lay awake to the strange sounds of her ghost whimpering in the closet. The more she tried to ignore it, the more the whimpering filled her ears and head until every muscle was tense in listening. At about three a.m., Jane pulled open her bedroom door with enough force to shake her dresser and knock over her porcelain figurine of Sleeping Beauty. She pounded her bare feet on the floor as she walked down the hall and knocked on the closed door with her fist. Silence followed.

“What,” she said.

“Jane, it’s me,” said the voice of Paul.

“I know. Don’t you think it’s time to move on?”

“I saw you already have.” His tone was trying to be bitter, but it was a voice that was better suited for ooohing and boooing.

Jane sighed.

“Paul, sweetheart, I see you’ve kept your word.”

“That’s right,” he said. He was proud of his transparent self.

“I love you for it. I will always love you. You are a true blue love-her-til-the-end, keep-her-up-all-night, never-say-good-bye guy. But, you are dead.”

Paul couldn't deny this. He nodded his head-shaped part and then said aloud, “I'm nodding,” so Jane would know

“Right,” she said.

“So, if I don't leave you alone, you'll hate me, right?”

Jane nodded, and then said, “I'm nodding, now ”

“I know,” he said, “I can see through walls.”

This made Jane a bit uncomfortable, but she was brave. She simply asked him for a good-bye kiss, which he readily supplied, reminded him to be a good little ghost, and to go towards the light or whatever. Paul flitted off. He suddenly remembered that Marilyn Monroe was dead, and so were John Lennon, Franz Kafka, and Princess Di, so he'd be in good company. He headed back to the place where he'd kicked it and found a spiritual trap door and spiritual ladder. He opted for the latter.

Jane went to bed. She dreamt she was at a party with Madonna, Jimmy Carter, Toni Morrison and L.L. Cool J. I'm in good company, she thought. Cute Guy walked in, offered her a drink, and said, Lose the zero and go with the hero. It was a line from a Vanilla Ice movie, but was good enough for a dream.

## My Hips

I was twelve when I discovered W.B. Yeats' Queen Maeve. I was a romantic and had been lingering over doleful Poe and the disenchanted Thomas of "Fern Hill," dramatically mourning the end of my childhood. I could feel my body changing and I wanted to change with it, and figuring poets had all the answers, I looked on my bookshelf for clues on how to grow-up. Queen Maeve was stirring. She was magical, feminine, and exquisitely royal. Yeats said she was beautiful "in that old way" and "fashioned to be the mother of strong children." I remember most especially that she had childbearing hips, a part of the body I now deemed to be the most essential element of being a woman.

I remember getting hips. When climbing into a van on a school trip I realized that I had to turn my body sideways to fit through the space to the backseat. I felt as exaggerated as a woman with bustles who has to walk laterally through doors. This discovery thrilled me and I sidled through narrow spaces as though my abdomen was a great wall, but hip first I was as slender as a tropical fish.

It was junior high and my hips were the only curvaceous part of my horridly angular body. When piling into crowded backseats, I was afraid to sit on anyone's lap because my bony butt would dig into their thigh. I was afraid to wear tank tops because they would see that my arms were long white sticks. My neck was steep, my collarbones were insistent. My developing breasts were hard pits of growth, my legs were maypoles broken by rocky knees. My elbows and ankles were all knobs, and my long feet were alien appendages. Even so, I longed and dreamed of a fairy queen beauty.

In a downstairs closet I discovered my grandmother's flapper dress, a spectacular black number that falls straight from the shoulders down to the knees where it flares in a swish-able skirt. I tried it on (with black gloves past elbows, to ease most of the stick arm horror), put my hair up, and lovely as Audrey Hepburn, bobbed upstairs and posed proudly for my family. It was in such moments that I was sure others could see how pretty I was becoming. My sister Jessica was holding the camera, but she whispered something to my mother and then laughed.

"What," I wanted to know.

She wouldn't say. I knew it was bad news, but because I was thirteen, and in some ways eager for tragedy, I pressed.

"I just said, you look like a black toothpick." The "pick" part was muffled by the laugh rising up to her chin. Toothpick, beanpole, twig, and stick. Other skinny words, like willowy, lithe, and slender, were disguised as compliments, but to me simply meant: you are far from a woman, little girl. You are half a step from being a boy. At "toothpick" I'm sure I ran down the hall, slammed my door with practiced precision, and flung myself on my bed in despair. Maybe, I thought, the problem was that dress, straight lines, boyish, unfeminine. Queen Maeve would glide through her court in a gown that celebrated her hips.

I couldn't quite resolve myself to not being beautiful. I wanted it too much. I thought about it on the bus from school and pretended that the boys across the isle were watching me look out the window and thinking, she's cute.

Do you think she'd like me? Naw, every guy at Bryant digs Shannon. I wonder what she's *really* like. Beyond just being a babe.

I locked the bathroom door and stood before the mirror. If I held really still, I saw a picture of me, and it was beautiful. Maybe when I looked out the bus window, posing still and pensive, they could see that picture of me. At least I didn't make the flapper dress mistake again. I refused to wear anything without a waistline and when I bought a pair of overalls, I wore them with a thick, thrift store belt. Hips were a comfort to me. They pulled out from my sides and made a waist, tidy and curved. They gave me a junior high hope of an hourglass of sorts. There was a definite indentation between where my last rib hung and where the corners of my pelvis stuck out like hitchhiking thumbs.

My best friend, Jenny Norman, first showed me that hips could be more than just proof that I wasn't a boy, and being a woman could be more than sidling sideways through narrow places. She was a terrifically curvy girl and extremely interesting to look at. While she bounced, I slouched. Jenny told me that her favorite place on her body was that stretch of curve between the two hard points of hip and thighbone. I had never even noticed that place before, and running a palm over that lovely smooth range of my skin, I thought that maybe my hips were beautiful like hers. We got into the habit of bouncing the heel of our hands off our pelvis bone as we walked. We pitied boys with their straight and tedious silhouettes.

I believed part of being a woman was attracting men. Queen Maeve had been so powerfully feminine that she "could have called over the rim of the world any woman's lover." Jenny, I thought, was a Maeve-in-training. Jenny tried to show me how to walk to make boys look, to be slinkier, to feel sexy in my little gangling body. She amazed me at malls and waterparks how she could always find a guy to follow her around. My job was to stand guard while they made-out on the mall roof or behind the snow cone tent under a

towel. The guy usually had a friend, but I couldn't seem to learn how to use my hips right to make him want me, and we would stand together awkwardly, talking about TV shows and trying to look away from where they were pleasantly writhing.

There's a home video (that for years I've hid away with embarrassment) of me and Jenny making up a little play. For lack of actors, all our male characters are conveniently off-stage. In the story, Jenny flaunts her curves and gets the boys. I get the shaft and kill her with a blow dryer. The camera looks up at me from the floor as I walk slowly off screen holding the still-warm murder weapon, dramatically grimacing through braces. I'm all edges—metal brackets and wires, ribs and collarbones, elbows and anklebones. My nightshirt hangs on me like I'm a scarecrow made of poles. When we watched the video, Jenny laughed. I tried. It was painful to actually see, in full color, that harsh evidence of my skinny awkwardness. I wasn't fooling anyone. Not an inch like the fairy queen I'd hoped to be. At the very least, I should've worn something with a waist.

In high school I avoided the drop-waist and big T-shirt styles of the eighties. I loved those wide spandex belts and button-up pants that came as high as my first rib, anything to show my waist and hips. The only compliment on my body I ever remember getting was, "You have such a tiny waist." My waist only existed in contrast to my hips, and I was grateful for them. I liked to stand with my hands on my hips feel them there, sturdy under my fingers. I took it for granted that all women loved their hips, confirmed by the image of the nightclub singer who lounges on a grand piano on her side to exaggerate that dramatic slope between waist and leg. I didn't take the time to look around me, to see my sister Jessica, and other girls like her, donning the T-shirt dresses and oversized sweaters and hiding inside them. I didn't see her pulling in against her own

expanding woman's body, avoiding pool parties, sleeping in long men's pajamas under thick blankets. We all felt ugly and we all wanted to be beautiful. Her goal was to get smaller, while I longed to be bigger, with hips even wider. I was blinded by that paragon of beauty, in envy of child-bearing Maeve.

I asked my dad, "Is it true that wide-hipped women bear children more easily?" My father is an OBGYN and a great in-house source of body info.

"The width of the hips is not an indication," said Dr. Bryner, "it's the size of the cervix."

"Then why do women have hips?"

"For swiveling," he said. He shrugged, stumped.

I imagined cavemen choosing mates by the roll of their hips as they walked barefoot through the swamps, their feet sticking in the gray ooze and making unpleasant (though perhaps primevally erotic) slurping sounds. But I wanted some legitimate evolutionary reasons. I knew hips widen when a woman is pregnant, and that width must help support the weight of her belly, but was that all?

It was some years later that I got nephews, and the functionality of hips began to be clear. It was natural for me to pick up one of my nephews and sit them on my hip. They are my biological benches. My father sees the babies when they are the size of a good lake trout and can fit easily into his hands, and then he sends them home, catch and release. But my nephews quickly grew out of the bundling size and they are too heavy for my stick-girl arms. I carried them with one arm around their belly, holding them upright against the seat of my hip. It didn't occur to my dad, a poor, waist-less man, that women might need their hips to hold children.

I met another hip-ignorant man in a wheel-thrown pottery class. I was the only novice in the class and got almost too much attention from the potter. He was a graying man who seemed slightly buzzed all day and didn't own a whole fingernail among the ten. His fingertips were gray and broken like poorly dried clay. Once I stayed late glazing pots in time for Christmas and on my way out I stumbled upon him asleep on the floor under a rack of leather-dry bowls. I think it was his bedroom. He must have loved potting so much that he was willing to sleep on floors and ravage his fingers for his art. I wondered if he loved his hands.

The other students in our class, three wise and practiced ladies, were only there for his breathtaking glazes. They potted quietly and independently. The potterman told me, "Never touch the clay unless it's moving. Never touch it with one hand unless you also touch it with the other. Never touch it at all without anchoring your arm." He showed me how to hug my elbow against my side while centering the slippery beast on the wheel. My pots were crooked wet lumps. My pinky fingernail burned against the spinning wheel, smelling like Sammy Stewart's second grade birthday when she leaned too far over the cake and her hair was bit off into smoke. I carefully removed my first standing pot from the wheel with my wire and held it up proudly. It crumpled into a pool of mud.

"You throw away the first hundred," said the potter. He stepped out for a smoke (and to laugh, I think) and I was alone with the three silent women. They looked me over fondly.

"Don't just tuck your elbow to center the clay," said the elegant woman. She almost whispered. "Push your elbow into your hip." She was working on white porcelain so delicate it seemed to be damp baby powder.



“Yes, you’ll work better using your hip for support,” said the second who was nicely plump. “He doesn’t know that. He’s a man.” The women smiled at each other and I got goosebumps. I thought, I have been alone with the Three Fates, throwing, shaping and kilning lives. I realized that the knowledge of hips belonged to the category of secret women things and felt privileged to be included in their counsel. They didn’t question that I was a woman (and I was even wearing overalls—unbelted).

I finally accounted for men’s ignorance of hip lore, like my father’s and that poor potterman’s. They don’t have them, they don’t think about them, they don’t even notice them. It wasn’t Jenny’s hips those guys wanted to touch when she was followed around the waterpark in her bright yellow bikini. The men I knew who could tell me why they loved a woman’s body never mentioned hips. They were my own discovery, an induction into womanhood. And especially, a tool. I could throw pottery with my hips. I could raise a child with my hips. They were for shutting doors, carrying the weight of pregnancy, straightening a bookshelf when my hands were full, keeping rhythm. They had form and function, like the art of a well-built house or a carved pinewood bench, sanded smooth and stained skin-pale.

Styles changed and I became neglectful of my hips. I wear shirts untucked and my belts hang amiably ignored in my closet. Boys-cut jeans have become popular, and women slight their hips altogether. Until recently, I’d let myself forget the part of my body that defined my womanness through critically unlovely years.

Jessica also remembers getting hips, like my day on the fieldtrip bus. One morning she went to put on her favorite pair of jeans, “Used” brand, and they wouldn’t come up over her thighs. Were they washed in hot water? I asked. No, she insisted her

hips sprang from her sides overnight like Athena from Zeus' head. But she wasn't thrilled. She's kept those jeans, hoping one day her hips will get out of the way. Jessica does not love her hips. When she stands in front of her full length mirror before going out, she pats her hips gently, unconsciously, as if trying to push them in and away.

Hips have been neglected, I say. They've been patted and told to go away. Men ignore them, concentrating on the more popular curves above and behind. Women hide them, try to lose them, scorn their widened post-natal hips that hold onto the memory of the fetus and refuse to slim back. I saw a row of women in front of clothing store mirrors, pat-patting their hips, trying on black dresses to make them look smaller, more lithe, more willowy. I didn't think my three potting Fates would have approved. I knew Yeats would have mourned that women no longer liked being beautiful in that "old way," with their round, beautiful, child-bearing hips.

I looked up Yeats' poem recently and there is no mention of her hips. Anywhere. All he says is she was "great-bodied and great-limbed," nothing at all like my toothpick junior high body. But I clearly remember that Queen Maeve had child-bearing hips. I must have wanted to identify with Maeve so badly, with her confidence and royalty and beauty, that when I got hips, I rewrote the memory of that poem, and described her to look like thought I was becoming. I never did become like Maeve, or Linda Carter or Jacqueline Smith. But my body grew used to itself, settled into my bones and made itself at home. I am not as ugly as I once thought I was. I am not as beautiful as I hoped. It took a lot of personal talks and over a year of tromping around South America without make-up, but I'm easy with myself now, and so much happier.

Now Jessica, on the other hand, has a true Yeatsian beauty. We all groan at family pictures, because next to her, we look drab and insignificant. Your features, your height, your skin, we praise. I'm homely, I'm wide, I'm plain, she says. She underwent a painful breast reduction in high school after feeling too many eyes not on her face when in her dance company leotard. She still sits with her shoulders rounded, hiding her breasts in the hollow of her loose shirt. Like Jenny Norman, she looked like a woman before her time, but she hated the marking. She's gained a hundred pounds since high school. She thinks her hips are another bothersome reminder that her body is too big.

I have recently become engaged to a man who's never made out with a girl in a mall. For years, Jessica and I had planned that when I married I would wear my mother's wedding dress from 1964. It's cool. It has funky lace bell-sleeves and a square train. It's also straight, no waist, no hips. Maeve out of my mind, my priority for my wedding day was more nostalgia than beauty.

"I never liked that dress," said my mom. "In those days, we didn't even get to pick our own style. I want you to at least shop around first."

I've always hated shopping. I believe that even the most confident woman in the world can break down eventually under the pressure of all those mirrors. But I let myself be dragged, maybe a little eager to play bride dress-up for an hour.

There were so many mirrors at the wedding dress superstore that it looked like a fun house, and gave the ominous impression that the mauve carpet went on forever. Karen, my wedding dress assistant for the day, eyed my left hand to make sure I was really engaged and then sat me down at a custard-white table adorned with pastel silk flowers. She had me look through their catalog and pick dresses I liked, of which there

were none, and I was ready to leave when my mom asked me to try on the ball gown number that was on the mannequin. It wasn't until I had pulled it over my head in the tiny, curtained dressing room that I felt its Maeve-ness. The bodice was simple, running a matte ivory skin over my ribcage and tight around my waist down to my pelvis. But then, suddenly, the skirts sprang from my hips in a huge, sweeping, be-rosed bell of tulle and organza. This is how it feels to be her, I thought, and burst from my room in glory and pranced around the shop. There was no possibility that I might look like an ivory toothpick—I was a fairy princess. My mother's cheeks blazed and she apologized to Karen and asked me to behave. I continued my dancing.

It didn't matter that my hair was lank and I wasn't wearing lipstick. I felt beautiful. And the beautiful I felt was surely the old way of being beautiful. That dress is a celebration of hips. While my mother blushed, Jessica watched me caper, and she laughed. She loved the dress, too. She doesn't know how growing up I had to love my hips because she never needed to love hers. But she loves to dance. Those are the only times that she allows herself to feel those quick moments of contentment in her own skin, to feel at peace with her roundness and largeness and grace of limb.

Jessica watched me prance, and she cheered. I looked at her instead of the mirrors and laughed with goodness. She saw how I picked up the skirts and skipped and jogged in my barefeet and she knew that I felt lovely. I wished she would try on a dress and dance with me. I wished I could buy her a dress that would make her feel that her body was as she thought it should be, that she didn't need surgery or sleep or drugs to get there, that ever after she would be as content as though she was always dancing. I was grateful to her for applauding me. I bought the dress.